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PSC TO HOLD MISSOULA MEETING ON CONSUMER PROTECTION RULES FOR RESTRUCTURED ELECTRIC AND NATURAL GAS UTILITIES

Public Service Commissioner Bob Rowe will hold a public meeting in Missoula on Thursday, January 14, to discuss two parts of electric restructuring of concern to smaller customers: the PSC's proposed consumer protection and information rules for restructured electric and natural gas utilities and how electric service would be provided to residential or small business customers if competition does not develop to serve them.

The meeting will begin at 7 p.m. at the Double Tree Hotel, 100 Madison St.

Rowe stated, "Consumer input is especially important as we move into this phase of energy supply restructuring. What kinds of protections do small customers want? What do we do if energy suppliers don't seek to serve all smaller customers, or if some customers decide not to participate in the market?"

Rowe said, "I intend this meeting as a round table to begin getting consumer input on how energy supply competition will serve them."

The proposed consumer protection rules address these topics:

- o requirements for verifying customers' choices of supplier and investigating unauthorized supplier switches;
- o service contracts between customers and suppliers;
- o supplier termination of a customer's service contract due to nonpayment;
- o billing;
- o default supplier that would be obligated to provide electricity or natural gas supply service to customers whose service with another supplier has been terminated, or to customers who have not yet selected a supplier;
- o service disconnection;
- o complaint procedures; and
- o marketing claims by suppliers.

According to Rowe, there are several proposals for how service could be provided to small customers, either if competition does not develop to serve them, or if they "choose not to choose" a supplier. MPC, which will continue to operate the distribution wires, could be required to serve them. A new, non-profit organization could be established. A competitive bid could be used to obtain a reliable, least-cost provider. Or, local governments could become energy providers. The various proposals will be considered by the PSC, and might also be the topic of legislation during the current session.

The proposed rules are available on the PSC's Internet web site at www.psc.state.mt.us, or may be obtained by calling Denise Peterson at the PSC at 406-444-6377. Interested persons may submit written comments to: Denise Peterson, Re: L-98.10.5-RUL, PSC, P.O. Box 202601, Helena, MT 59620-2601.

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